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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002062

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SA/INS AND CA/OCS
STATE ALSO PASS USAID/OFDA - THAYER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/OFDA - DOLAN
NEW DELHI FOR FAS
USPACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: CASC AEMR PREL EAID CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: ASSISTANCE EFFORTS BEGIN

REF: COLOMBO 2053 AND PREVIOUS

11. (U) As of COB on December 28, unconfirmed estimates put the number killed in the December 26 tsunami at over 12,000 (some tallies were as high as 18,000), of which, according to the Sri Lankan Tourist Board, 70 were foreign tourists. The Embassy has confirmed that seven American citizens were killed, while approximately 100 remain unaccounted for. An American consular officer visited the convention center in Colombo, where the Government is temporarily housing displaced foreign tourists, in an effort to make contact with any Americans who may have turned up there. As of COB on December 28, one American had been located at the convention center. A Sri Lankan LES went to the morgue to photograph the bodies of 31 unidentified foreigners that the Sri Lankan military had airlifted from various locations in the south. The Consular section is checking passport photographs of Americans reported missing for any possible matches. As of COB on December 28, none had been found.

12. (SBU) The Ambassador updated Foreign Secretary H.M.G.S. Palihakkara on U.S. assistance efforts the morning of December 28. The Ambassador emphasized to the Secretary the importance of the Government designating one clear, overarching point of contact to coordinate disaster assistance with the various bilateral and multilateral missions offering aid. Most important, he stressed, the person in charge must have sufficient authority to make things happen and to take quick decisions. Palihakkara agreed and promised to convey that message. Nonetheless, confusion persists among donors and, apparently, among Sri Lankans themselves about whether relief efforts are being handled by the Prime Minister's Office, the President's Office or the National Disaster Management Center.

13. (SBU) Ambassador and DATT also met with Defense Secretary Ashoka Jayawardene to brief him on assistance

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planned from the U.S. military. After offering his condolences, the Ambassador reported that a 31-person joint assessment team will begin arriving late December 28 to review assistance needs and make recommendations, to be followed by an Expeditionary Strike group, expected to reach Sri Lanka next week. The Ambassador also noted that he had spoken by telephone with the Commander of Pacific Command the morning of December 28 with special requests for medical support, helicopter airlift, water purification units and other relief supplies. He asked Jayawardene how best to proceed with providing these services.

14. (SBU) Jayawardene expressed appreciation for the USD 100,000 already promised his government in emergency disaster relief. He noted that the Indian government had sent two ships to Galle in the south and two ships and six helicopters to Trincomalee in the east. Indian medical teams were already on the ground in Galle and Matara. In addition, he reported, the Russians have provided 50 teams with sniffer dogs, along with a scout helicopter, to handle operations in the north and other uncleared areas. The French have sent teams to Batticaloa and Ampara in the east; other teams from Israel and Japan are expected soon. (Note: One Japanese medical/surgical team is reportedly already deployed in country. End note.) He ensured his full support to clear any bureaucratic hurdles for U.S. assistance and overflight clearances. He added that President Kumaratunga (whom he identified as in charge of relief operations) had directed the disaster management committee to make photographing, fingerprinting and burying the thousands of bodies left by the tsunami its first priority.

15. (U) Three USAID/OFDA officers had arrived in Colombo as of late December 28; more are expected in coming days. Coordinating closely with the AID Mission in Colombo, other donors and the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL), OFDA will deploy three assessment teams on two-day missions to the southern districts of Hambantota and Galle and the eastern district of Trincomalee beginning on December 29. The teams

will work with UN field offices and local and international NGOs already on the ground in these areas. Other assessment teams, composed of specialists from the EU, France, UN, the British aid agency DFID, and Swiss Disaster Relief, will visit six other districts affected by the tsunami. Through their combined efforts, the international assessment teams will cover all districts that suffered significant damage/loss of life in the disaster.

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